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# Transnational policy flows in European education: the making and governing of knowledge in the educational policy field

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Transnational policy flows in European education: the making and governing of knowledge in the educational policy field**, edited by Andreas Nordin and Daniel Sundberg, Oxford, Symposium Books, 2014, 240 pp., £32 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-873927-52-6

As Daniel Pettersson points out when considering 'The development of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement', systematic comparative education research really began with the work of Marc-Antoine Jullien who first constructed a comparative methodology in 1817. More recently and partly in response to challenges such as that of Michael Sadler who, in his Oxford address of 1900, asked, 'how far can we learn anything of practical value from the study of foreign systems of education?', comparative education has come to be defined by the use of standardised student assessments to evaluate education systems and provide policy guidance. A critical appraisal of how this has happened and what it now looks like is provided by 'Transnational policy flows in European education' in the excellent *Oxford Studies in Comparative Education* series, which will be of interest to anyone who wishes to better understand education policy-making in Europe.

An early chapter by Ulf Lundgren reminds us that the cross-national movement of ideas has long been an impetus for educational development. As the destination of much nineteenth and early twentieth century European migration, the United States of America was a particularly fertile place for bringing together, developing and sharing progressive ideas, something the story of Hilda Taba, an influential Estonian educationalist, illustrates well. Other chapters by Martin Lawn and Seamus Hegarty consider the work of two other Nordic actors, Laurin Zilliacus and Torsten Husén, to show how different systematic approaches to analysing schools and systems developed.

But much of this book, as the title suggests, provides a current analysis of education policy movement in Europe. This is set within the uncertainties and fluidity of late-modernity where faith is placed in what Ozga (2008) calls the tyranny of governance by numbers, as the national is subsumed within the global. Christian Lundahl's account of the development of an international encyclopaedia of education in the 1980s provides a reminder of both the optimism once held that scientific certainty would prevail in the social arena and the tensions this brought. But with diminishing faith that education science can live up to these expectations, increased faith in market mechanisms of competition and choice by policy-makers leaves an 'invisible hand' to determine what works best – where best for education is measured by standardised student assessments. Added to this, the days are long gone – if they ever existed – when education policy was the preserve of national governments. International organisations like UNESCO in its goal setting and global monitoring activities, the OECD which administers and analyses PISA international comparative student assessments and the European Union whose education mission has become to support the cross national development of human capital are highly influential. This is so much so that recent research on education policy has argued for the redefinition of what Stephen Ball has called 'the policy cycle' (Ball and Bowe 1992) to include a level of global governance (Lingard, Martino, and Rezai-Rashti 2013). Here, international assessment regimes are seen as in dialogue with national – vernacular, even – testing, with the global complementing the national as commensurate spaces for measurement (Ball 2015). And within this picture, policy-making has also become a dialogue between the global and the local.

Coming out of a Swedish Research Council funded European network symposium, 'Educational Reforms in Europe', held in 2012 at Linnaeus University, Sweden, there is a strong Nordic – Swedish even – feel to many of the case studies and educationalists considered in this volume. For me this added to the appeal; the opportunity to read a number of chapters dealing with the process of Europeanisation from the perspective of one country allowed a greater appreciation of the complexity of this process. It has long been suggested that comparison is a good thing, providing opportunities to learn from the experience of others (Phillips 2000), and 'by making the strange familiar we make the familiar strange' (Alexander 2000, 27). For the reader less familiar with the Swedish context this is certainly the case, and there is much here that will, I am sure, resonate with readers elsewhere. Nafsika Alexiadou's analysis of policy learning through the EU's open method of coordination challenges more simplistic accounts of policy borrowing whilst also showing how the European Commission's governance activities stretch into areas like education for which the EU has no legislative remit. Andreas Nordin examines this Europeanisation of the education policy field and its effect on national policy using Swedish comprehensive school reform as a case study. In doing so, the notion of vertical and horizontal translations is introduced by considering reform at the level of policies, programmes and philosophies. This distinction, first developed by Vivian Schmidt (2008) seems to me to be very helpful; whilst policies may be isolated and distinct, they are often coordinated at a programmatic level and may or may not be underpinned by a common philosophy. Considering each in turn allows a more nuanced picture of policy change to emerge. Ninni Wahlström analyses the changing role of the state in the wider policy context described above, again focussing on Sweden, whilst Eva Forsberg, first with Daniel Pettersson and then Henrik Román, broadens out considerations to how national education policy in Sweden has been shaped and reshaped.

I must admit I read this book at leisure during a period of leave, and this may have influenced the impression that this rich and interesting volume made on me. There is much more I could have discussed in this review, but for that which is included, I apologise for anything the authors feel my partial and particular reading has misrepresented. All I can do is heartily recommend 'Transnational policy flows in European education' as both a thorough introduction and worthwhile contribution to the comparative policy sociology of European education at a time when an understanding of the dialectic between the global and the local is becoming increasingly important.

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